

Review Essay Series

KANSAS LITERATURE

by Thomas Fox Averill

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

The fourth article in our new series focuses on the literature and cultural history of Kansas. The purpose of the series is to provide a comprehensive view of our state's history with significant insights into the new perspectives we have discovered in the last thirty-five years. We also hope the essays will inspire new research and writings. This article, which examines an often ignored topic in cultural history, is an excellent fit.

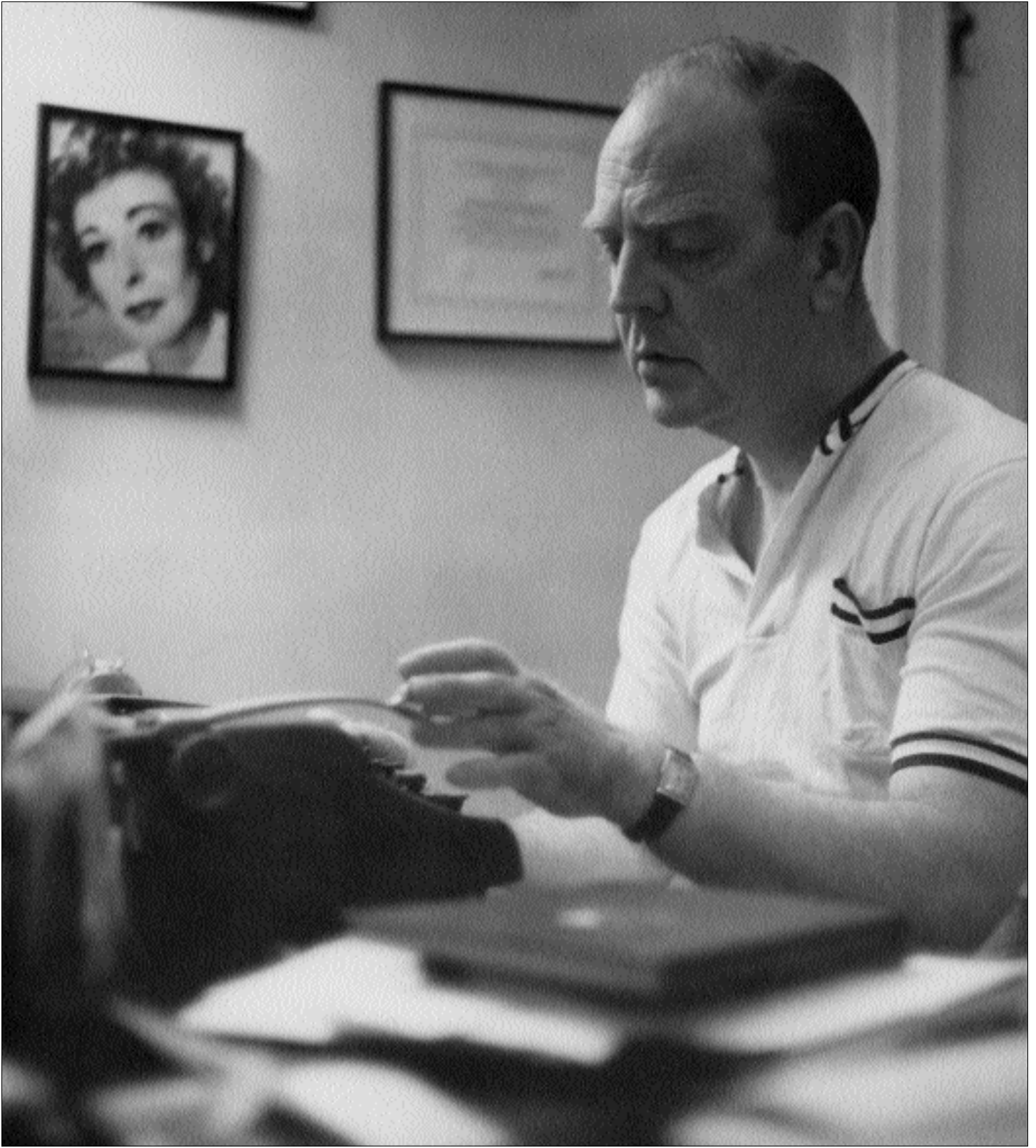
Here Tom Averill, writer and teacher of Kansas literature, discusses why Kansas literature has been neglected and why it should be used to understand our cultural past. He argues that the failure to properly respect and use Kansas literature comes from a number of sources. Historians often mistrust it, and much Kansas literature has been undervalued because it was written by women and minori-

I. KANSAS LITERATURE: A BEFORE

When I first became interested in reading and studying Kansas literature as a graduate student in the early 1970s, I was pleasantly surprised when one of my University of Kansas professors, Roy A. Gridley, gave me two extensive bibliographies put together by Ben Fuson, longtime professor of English at Kansas Wesleyan University. Both were published in booklet form by the Kansas Association of Teachers of English and Kansas Wesleyan. Fuson had made a *Centennial Literary Map of Kansas: 1854–1961*. His *Centennial Bibliography*, published in 1961, was, along with *Kansas Literature of the Nineteen Sixties* (1970), a supplement to his map, and part of his efforts to depict and record the history of writing in Kansas. Fuson wrote: "Originally intended as a pamphlet containing annotations for the writers' names featured on the CENTENNIAL LITERARY MAP OF KANSAS, this booklet has been expanded and organized to embody at least a preliminary attempt at a bibliography of Kansas writers and their literature."¹ The 1961 bibliography, and the seven hundred additional titles in the 1970 publication, show Fuson's long hours researching writers and collecting the names of their works. Still, although some writers are treated biographically in paragraph-long sketches, Fuson's work is solely bibliographic. Fuson tells the curious what is there but says nothing of where the literature might be found (much of Kansas literature is hopelessly out of print, existing only in special collections); nor does Fuson tell

Thomas Fox Averill is writer-in-residence and a professor of English at Washburn University, where he teaches courses in creative writing and in Kansas literature, folklore, and film. He helped found, and was the first director of, Washburn's Center for Kansas Studies, and he is the editor of *What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth Century Writers on the Sunflower State*. His most recent book is *Secrets of the Tsil Cafe*.

1. Ben Fuson, *Centennial Bibliography of Kansas Literature: Supplement to "Centennial Literary Map of Kansas: 1854–1961"* (Salina: Kansas Association of Teachers of English, Kansas Wesleyan University, 1961), 3.



Kansas playwright William Inge.

ties. Yet, as Averill argues successfully, Kansas literature is a valuable part of our cultural past; “our literature has a direct bearing on our understanding of who we are as a people.” It also allows us to recognize our relationship to the American West and to the nation as a whole.

Literature represents an aspect of our cultural history that looks at the meaning of life in Kansas in a way that historians often cannot. Margaret Hill McCarter, for example, is little known to Kansans, but as Averill points out, “she created a sense of Kansas—hopeful, adventure-filled, rewarding—that tells us a great deal about ourselves at the turn of the twentieth century.” Literature thus can examine the meaning of historical experience as the author saw it, and open our eyes and minds to alternative meanings and possibilities.

A major example of this is the work of Gordon Parks, a multifaceted genius, internationally known as a photographer, composer of music, and writer. One of his most famous works, *The Learning Tree*, depicts what it was like to grow up in an African American family in a segregated southeastern Kansas town. This book is astounding in its ability to explain the nature of segregation and racism in the 1920s. Most Kansans were taken aback in 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision in *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* because it suggested Kansas was comparable to the South in racism and a policy of segregation. Here, too, we can explore

what significance the listings have to understanding Kansas (no speculation on any Kansas literary culture); nor any judgments about what books actually are worth reading (no sense of lasting literary quality). Like the map Fuson’s bibliography supplements, the terrain is there, but without any guidance for satisfactory travel.

Fuson’s work is invaluable nevertheless: without a map, how does anyone know that there is a definable territory? At the same time I found Fuson’s bibliographies, I was searching for articles and scholarship about writers of Kansas literature at many other places. At libraries I found a few articles, books, theses, and dissertations, along with reviews of the most prominent Kansas books. At library sales of little-read books I often found the work of Kansans mentioned in Fuson’s bibliography but unknown to the library staff as such; many of those books now make up my own “Kansas collection.” In library special collections I found correspondence, photographs, manuscripts. In archives I found papers of those writers who had been on faculties in our state’s colleges and universities. On the shelves of my professors at KU—particularly writer Edgar Wolfe—I found works by his peers, colleagues, friends, and students. But for everything I managed to find, I became more aware of what was *not* there for any scholar who wanted to understand Kansas through its literature. For example, my search of our own *Kansas History* and its forerunner, *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, showed that few scholars had been attracted to any serious study of the literary history of Kansas. Although much has changed over the past thirty years, I want to discuss the past as a way of pointing to recent contributions and to suggest future directions.

In the past, except for very recent scholarship, and except for work by very prominent writers—William Allen White, Langston Hughes, Gordon Parks, William Inge, and William Stafford, perhaps—and except for what are usually biographical studies of Kansans who have written, Kansas literature has largely been ignored. Some writers—journalists such as William Allen White, historians such as James Malin, economists such as John Ise, or nonfiction writers such as Osa and Martin Johnson—garner attention. The true literary artist—the poet, the short story writer, the novelist, and the playwright—do not. Confusion about exactly what literature is makes researching our literary culture quite difficult. For example, the researcher might come across a promising-sounding article such as the one Charles Driscoll wrote for the *Wichita Beacon* on July 8, 1945. Its title: “Great Literature Pours Forth from Kansas.”² In it, Driscoll wonders why a certain Kansas writer authored a Kansas novel, *The Townsman*, pseudonymously, as “John Sedges,” rather than by his real name. What Kansan would not want to claim his own work? Driscoll asks. After all, “Kansans have produced more printable words and more lookable pictures than they are entitled to.” He then goes on to cite the work and lives of people he sees in the tradition of great Kansas literature. The disconnects begin immediately when Driscoll cites politician John J. Ingalls, who happened to have written a couple of good essays, and military leaders Dwight David Eisenhower and Fred Funston (who wrote no “literature” at all). I cannot quibble with the inclusion of journalist and novelist Edgar Watson Howe. His *The Story of a Country Town* (1883) will remain a classic; it was the nineteenth-century

2. “Kansas Authors and Books” clippings, vol. 1, 148, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

novel that launched the anti-small-town literature of the early twentieth century. And of course Driscoll rightfully includes William Allen White, although the “Sage of Emporia” will always be better known for his “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” and his autobiography than for his stories, poems, and sweeping social novels. But Driscoll goes on to cite as part of the same tradition the artist John Noble, journalist Henry J. Allen (good friend to White), suffragist Susan B. Anthony, populist Mary Ellen Lease, and temperance crusader Carry A. Nation. For good measure he throws in “Sockless” Jerry Simpson (populist politician); Harry Varnum Poor, John Steuart Curry (misspelling the middle name as Stewart), and Albert T. Reid (all artists); and finally Edgar Lee Masters (born in Garnett, but moved in infancy to Indiana). Driscoll ends his article: “E. T. Peterson, Victor Murdock, Harold Bell Wright, Paul I. Wellman; the list goes on into infinity. It is not a crowd to be ashamed of; let’s add the real name of the author of *The Townsman*.” I agree that Driscoll has a fine list of Kansans. But he has a lousy list of literary Kansans. Ironically, *The Townsman* is, at least, a novel—a true piece of literature in an article entirely dominated by those mostly outside of or secondarily involved with the literary arts.³

The “Authors and Books” clippings (volumes 1–3) at the Kansas State Historical Society is a wonderful conglomeration that dramatizes our confusion about literature. Gleaned from the newspapers of the state and literally clipped and glued into scrapbooks, the articles are incredibly various. A club meeting somewhere might have discussed a book, and so it is pasted down forever. Visits by such dignitary authors as Pearl S. Buck are glued into the scrapbook. The next page might hold a piece about a paralyzed woman who has just published a cookbook, written entirely on an electric typewriter by use of a pencil clamped in her teeth. On still another page, a former Topekan and once-published author appears on a television show. But for all the chaff, there is still wheat. Finish an odd article, then turn the page and you might find a serious essay by novelist Kenneth S. Davis—he later became the author of *Kansas: A Bicentennial History* (1976), as well as an exhaustive biographer of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Other pages chronicle the first book publication of William Stafford, who went on to win the National Book Award and who is inarguably Kansas’s finest poet. And someone clipped an article on Wichita State University poet Michael Van Walleghen when his poem “The Permanence of Witches” was published in *The Best Poems of 1966* (Pacific Press). The poem also was selected by the Nineteenth Annual Borestone Mountain Poetry Awards as first place, with an award of three hundred dollars.⁴ Van Walleghen has since moved from the state, but his *The Wichita Poems* (1975) stands as one of the fine volumes of poetry created here. So, in these clippings, what a wealth of information, and what an “old barn” of clutter. You never know what you’re going to get. But that’s because you never know what someone will call literature. Rightful confusion surrounds the term, as it does the terms author, writer, artist, book. After all, Ben Fuson’s *Centennial Bibliography* has twenty-two separate lists, including “Writers of Kansas Fiction during the Last Half-Century: 1911–1961” (list 4), “Non-Kansas Fiction by Earlier Kansas Authors: 1859–1911”

3. Although Driscoll claims to know the true author of *The Townsman*, he does not reveal the name; I have not discovered it yet for myself.

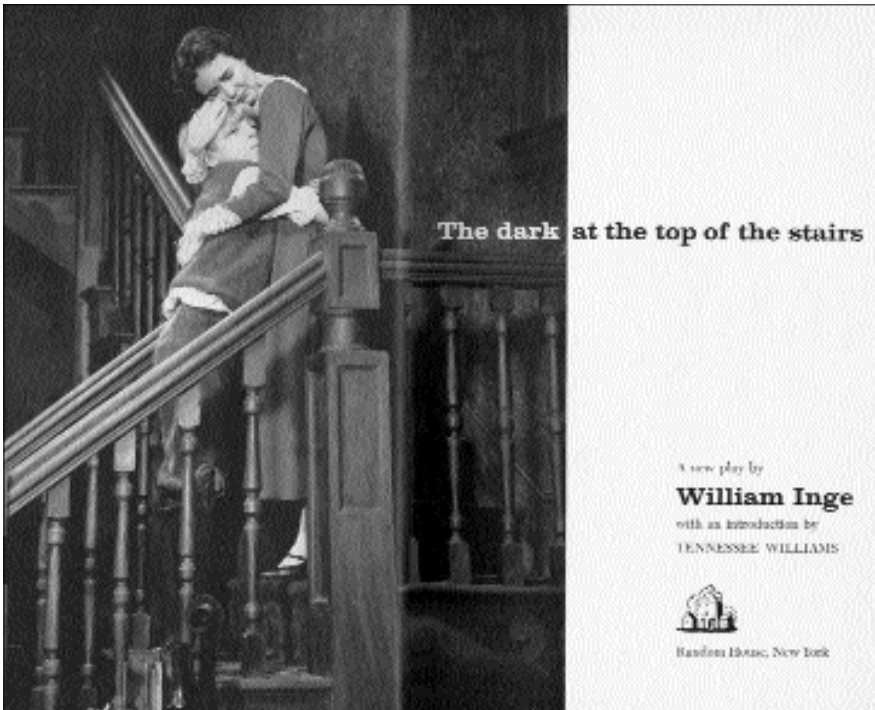
4. “Kansas Authors and Books” clippings, vol. 2, 130.

the power of cultural myth. Many if not most Kansans felt their sense of identity shattered by the Brown case, because that shared identity had been based, at least in part, on the cultural symbolism of the triumph of freedom over slavery in the territorial period.

Averill also points to the manner in which another book, *Sod and Stubble* by John Ise, covers the reality of Kansas re-settlement in a way few historians have or could. The deceptively simple story in this book richly portrays the perseverance of a family in the face of enormous hardships. In it are found all of the nineteenth-century values that sustained farming, yet the book also can be read for an understanding of the values and practices contributing to the coming of the Dust Bowl.

Averill introduces us to a host of authors we might not otherwise meet. Indeed he creates a template for reading long-forgotten but fine authors who reveal Kansas to us. He also calls our attention to the development of self-conscious regionalism and an appreciation for regional authors in the past thirty years. Each of these writers provides us with a different perspective on Kansas history and culture—perspectives that are both diverse and more inclusive than ever before. It is time to recognize these authors and let them tell us about Kansas cultural history.

Ann G. Napier
University of Kansas
Vigil W. Bean
Kansas State Historical Society



Kansas literature allows the reader to both ask and answer questions about our state's cultural roots. For example, plays by William Inge offer insights into life in small-town Kansas during the 1920s.

(list 8), "Later Writers and Books that Deal With Kansas (Excluding fiction and biography): 1911–1961" (list 13), "An Additional List of Kansas Poets of the Last Half-Century" (list 19), and "A Reference Bibliography for Kansas Literature" (list 22).

In the card catalogs in most libraries, a similar paucity and confusion is evident. I recently visited the Kansas State Historical Society's library. Under the subject heading Kansas–Literature I found book-length studies by or about Langston Hughes, William Allen White, Edgar Watson Howe (again these last two both journalists in their main reputation), and Kate Stephens (primarily an academic). Also cataloged are periodicals and anthologies, although most were published after 1970. Again, much that is cataloged is not strictly literature, but essay/article citations that repeat information about writers and writing in Kansas. The Kansas–Authors subject heading catalogs books and articles that are mostly bibliographic, with the very extensive reliance, as in Kansas–Literature, of the clippings files I've already mentioned. Some authors men-

tioned by name are Meridel LeSueur, Damon Runyan, Willard Wattles, and Zula Bennington Green. Kansas–Publishing mentions businesses: Emanuel Haldeman-Julius's *Little Blue Books*, McMeel in Kansas City, the University Press of Kansas, and the Topeka firms of Capper Publishing and Crane and Company. But the drawers of the card catalog, like the clippings files, do not suggest richness. Many more cards are devoted to the subject heading following Kansas—Authors, namely, Automobiles. Kansas literature has been neglected by scholars, then, in part because of the difficulty in finding it, part in the difficulty of defining it.

II. STUMBLING BLOCKS TO THE STUDY OF KANSAS LITERATURE

I began studying our state's literature because of my preference for that lens in understanding place. I think Kansas writing and writers have a unique and important perspective that should not be ignored or misunderstood. I am also a writer and interested in questions of place in my own creative writing. As I write and read, I think of some of the following questions, along with books that help me toward answers:

Why did people come to Kansas? See Jane Smiley's *The All-true Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (1998), set in territorial Lawrence.

What did they find? See Mela Meisner Lindsay's *Shukar Balan: The White Lamb*, set in Wakeeney around the turn of the twentieth century.⁵

What sacrifices did they have to make and were those sacrifices worth it? See Marcet and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius's *Dust*, set in southeast Kansas immediately after the Civil War.⁶

What strengths did people find in Kansas and in themselves in Kansas? See Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), set in Lawrence during the 1910s.

How does Kansas fit in with the mythos of the American West? See *Liar's Moon* (1999) by Philip Kimball.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of life in the Kansas small town? See the two plays by William Inge set in Kansas in the 1920s: *Picnic* (1953) and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1957).

Is contemporary Kansas unique, or like everywhere else in the Midwest? See *The Way It Is* (1998) by poet William Stafford.

Does Kansas have a promise that it still needs to live up to? See *The Learning Tree* (1963) by Gordon Parks, set in the Fort Scott of the 1920s but speaking to a 1960s audience.

What is the future for Kansas, and will an understanding of the past help people adjust to or shape that future? See contemporary writing by short story writers Eileen Fitzgerald and Gerald Shapiro, by poets Bruce Cutler, Steven Hind and Denise Low, by novelists Antonya Nelson and Patricia Traxler.

These seem to me a sampling, at least, of the questions literature is good at answering—questions that would be hard to answer without literature. They are historical and cultural questions. If literature is going to be part of answering them, then we need to understand how.

A good model comes from folklorist William Wilson in an article examining the contributions of folklore to historical study. The discipline of folklore has some of the same “stumbling blocks” as literature—at least where it comes to understanding history and culture. Wilson divides the relevance of folklore to history into three categories. First, he points out that folk traditions “do at times capture and retain actual historical fact.”⁷ A good example of this would be Bruce Cutler's well-researched *A West Wind Rises*, with its very accurate sense of characters, places, and the historical record of the Marais des Cygnes Massacre of 1858.

But Wilson goes on to assert that folklore also contains what he calls “cultural fact,” giving insight into “social structure and social values and attitudes. Malinowsky taught us some time ago that myth is a sort of aesthetic correlative of social organization, a mirror for culture, reflecting and justifying social practices and changing as those practices change.”⁸ Again, in *A West Wind Rises*, Cutler ad-

What is the
future for Kansas,
and will an
understanding of
the past help
people adjust to or
shape that future?

5. Mela Meisner Lindsay, *Shukar Balan: The White Lamb* (Lincoln, Nebr.: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1976). Books that are difficult to find or are long out of print will be footnoted. More popular work, readily available in libraries and bookstores (new and used) will not be footnoted.

6. Marcet and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, *Dust* (New York: Brentano's, 1921). This book, along with several short stories and plays written by this husband/wife team, under the title *Dust and Short Works*, is reprinted by Washburn University's Center for Kansas Studies and includes introductions by Gene DeGruson and Thomas Fox Averill.

7. William A. Wilson, “Folklore and History: Fact Amid the Legends,” in *Readings in American Folklore*, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand (New York: Norton, 1979), 450–51.

8. *Ibid.*, 455.

*Before we can use
literature to answer
our important
questions, we need
to overcome some
obstacles, step
over some
stumbling blocks.*

heres to, even reinforces, the predominant mythology of territorial Kansas. In his "Afterword," Dale Watts uses the correct term—"antislavery/free-state/antigovernment factions"—for those killed by Charles Hamilton in the Marais des Cygnes Massacre. Given the "cultural fact" of Kansas's beginnings, most of us will never think of our free-state founders as "antigovernment," although they were both outside of, and against, the law of the United States during their time. History may be re-written and re-interpreted, but our folklore and our literature will often insist upon, and reflect, our mythology. Other works by Kansas writers have done the same thing. When Kenneth Wiggins Porter wrote a long poem about the University of Kansas students who died fighting fascism in Spain, he made a cultural connection in the lines: "They were Kansans/ their schoolbooks had not yet forgotten/ John Brown/ . . . John Brown of Kansas still goes marching on—/ his tread is on the plains of Aragon!"⁹ And when Lawrence poet Ken Irby wanted to connect the radical hippie war protesters of the 1960s/1970s to their Lawrence abolitionist forebears—both facing violence in a "new" territory—he wrote:

The woods around Osawatomie
are as wild, the thickets
On Potawatomie Creek just
as dense and matted beard
as John Brown's grimeyed cutlass hacking massacre
a hundred years? . . .
The underground railway now
is dope not slaves, runaways
of revolution, nutcrackers, unshacklers
of deep spirits
the dark gods
wait in the blooded underground
their visage is more shapeless
and more terrible than ever.¹⁰

So cultural fact remains in the literature, whether it stands the test of actual fact or not.

Finally, William Wilson discusses "people's fact," the use of folklore "in determining what the people believe about their past."¹¹ In this context the current debate about the role of Sharps rifles in territorial skirmishing is purely historical. The overuse of Sharps as a symbol may not be historically accurate, but it will forever be believed by the people because Sharps is the gun of choice for any good story, whether in Jane Smiley's *Lidie Newton* or Bruce Cutler's *A West Wind Rises*. "People's fact" should not be seen as a thorn in the side of our understanding of Kansas, it should instead be embraced as an important cultural element. Wilson suggests how we can understand the multiple layers of "fact" available to us in our literature.

But before we can use literature to answer our important questions, we need to overcome some obstacles, step over some stumbling blocks.

9. Kenneth Wiggins Porter, "Harvest: June 1938," *The Kansas Poems* (Topeka: Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies, 1992), 19–20.

10. Ken Irby, "To Max Douglas," *To Max Douglas* (Lawrence, Kans.: Tansy-Pegleg Press, 1971).

11. Wilson, "Folklore and History," 460.

PAROCHIAL?

Beyond the difficulty of definition and identification, the study of a state literature has the stumbling block of seeming narrow, or parochial, to those graduate students and assistant professors starting their careers. I remember attending a scholarly conference on regional literature in East Lansing, Michigan, many years ago. One evening was set aside for socializing. Name tags represented colleges from across the United States. I planted myself between a Michigan professor and a Missouri associate professor and boldly announced my topic: "Teaching Kansas Literature: A Methodology."

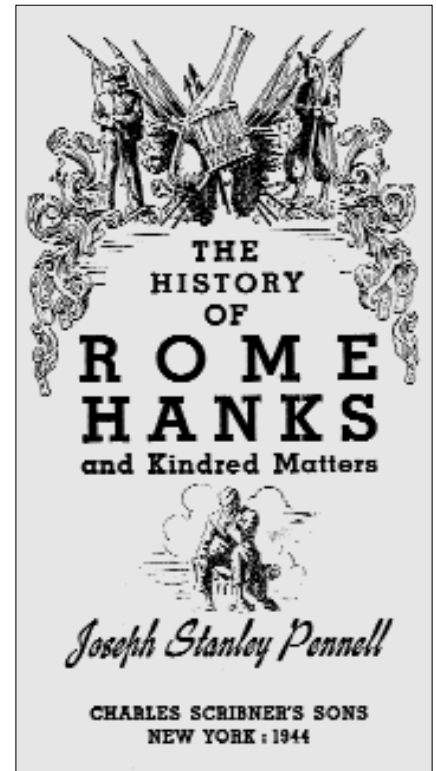
"Kansas literature?" smirked the Michiganan. "What on earth do you have to teach?"

I answered as best I could, naming the famous: Inge, Stafford, Capote, White, Hughes. But such names are more barriers of defense than they are ways to enter a conversation about the excitement and richness of discovering individual writers and a state's literary culture.

TRUTHFUL, REAL, HISTORICAL?

Another neglect comes from historians, who might have what would be a natural distrust of the created art of literature. A poem about Coronado by Ronald Johnson, a native of Ashland, is not factual, although it might contain facts. A short story like "L'il Boy," by Edythe Squier Draper, set in Oswego, Kansas, might tell us something of the racial and class attitudes of southeast Kansas in the early twentieth century, but it is not a sociological study. A novel, *The History of Rome Hanks*, set in the fictional Kansas town of Fork City, might show many likenesses to the Junction City of its author, Joseph Stanley Pennell, but it also might take great liberties in describing place and characters and local history.¹² A William Inge screenplay might echo the career of oilman Harry Sinclair with rich details of how he began his business, yet turn him into the "Ace" Stamper of *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and have him jump from a building in New York City during the stock market crash of 1929. For the historian/scholar, Kansas literature both is and is not about Kansas.

No wonder then, that one of the most revered texts in Kansas literature and history courses is *Sod and Stubble* by John Ise. The book, well-known both inside and outside Kansas, is a well-researched account of the life of the author's parents, Henry and Rosie Ise, with a particular emphasis on the recollections of Rosie. As in a novel, the characters in *Sod and Stubble* move through time: from their arrival in central Kansas in 1873 to what Ise calls "The End of Pioneering" in 1909. The episodes are dramatic, too: the death of a baby, the blizzards, the grasshoppers, the droughts, the mortgages, the births of eleven more children, the new machinery, and so on. The language is serviceable, more journalistic than literary. Yet students need reminding that the book is not a work of fiction, but a biography/history. Even John Ise wrote to a publisher in 1933, "I trust you will



Historians exhibit a natural distrust of literature because it may not be factual even though it might contain facts. Pennell's Rome Hanks provides insight into the historical Junction City, but it also takes liberties in presenting historical events.

12. Joseph Stanley Pennell, *The History of Rome Hanks and Kindred Matters* (1944; reprint Sag Harbor, N.Y.: Second Chance Press, 1982).



The above graphic of pioneer life is from John Ise's *Sod and Stubble*, one of the most revered texts in Kansas literature and history courses. It is important to note, however, that the work is neither literature nor history, but biography.

not consider this manuscript as a novel, or view it from the standpoint of novel writing, although it is written in the form of a story."¹³

I teach *Sod and Stubble* in Kansas literature courses, perhaps contributing to the same confusion over the term "literature" that I also complain about. I teach it to create a kind of "base line" for literature. From *Sod and Stubble* we move on to novels about pioneering Kansas: *Dust* (1921) by Marcet and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius; *Chaff in the Wind* (1964) by Edna Walker Chandler; *Come Spring* (1986) by Charlotte Hinger. Most historians, I think, would stop with the classic Ise work. They trust it historically. The new edition of *Sod and Stubble*, edited by Von Rothenberger (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), in fact treats the book with solid historical scholarship—including photographs, documents, even chapters that were deleted from the first edition by editors worried about sales, story line, readability.

Sod and Stubble should be taught, in both literature and history courses. But it should not be confused with literature, nor even with history. It is biography. Also, as with any text, it should not be taken out of context. It is about the years 1873–1909, but it is also about the Great Depression. After all, it was conceived and written during the deepest part of the Dirty Thirties (first published in 1936), and John Ise is speaking to readers of that time. As one reviewer wrote: "Here is a story of simple, brave, kindly people, living hopefully for the future—a story American in the best sense. . . . Sons and daughters of the old frontier will value it as it deserves, and to those *who have forgotten or grown skeptical of the 'American dream' it may come as a stimulus to fresh effort!*" (italics added).¹⁴

Kansas's own Sallie L. White made a similar point in her review for the *New York Herald Tribune Books*. She calls it a "biography of Henry and Rosy Ise, and it's much more than that. It is the history of a great social and economic adventure, part of the American saga of settlement and development of a primal world." In conclusion, she writes, "it is a saga of courage and its rewards. . . . Successful pioneers had self reliance as well as industry and courage." Then she cites what Ise does in his preface: "Of the eleven children who came out of this pioneer home, Henry and Rosy Ise sent nine of them through college and some of them afterward to Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford, University of Chicago and the University of Zurich, Switzerland—what a record!"¹⁵

In other words, the book is about pioneering, yes, but about the sacrifices necessary for "success." As such, it speaks to the 1930s reader: through suffering (as millions were during the Depression) and hard work one still has, in America, a very real chance for the ultimate goal of pioneering—getting off the farm through education. *Sod and Stubble* never makes this point directly, but the abandonment of farming, at least by the best and brightest of Kansans, is the subtext of almost every novel of pioneering I've read. So *Sod and Stubble* is historically accurate but needs to be put in the historical context of when it was written, and in the context

13. John Ise, *Sod and Stubble* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), with additional material by Von Rothenberger, p. xvii.

14. *Springfield (Mass.) Republican*, January 17, 1937.

15. Sallie L. White, "Birth, Death, Love and Growth," in *New York Herald Tribune Books*, June 27, 1937, vol. 13, 2.

of other books on pioneering. As such, in context, it will come to be a trusted text in both literature and history courses.

TRUSTED?

Other Kansas “literature” might never be trusted, even though most regional/state literature is both very place- and history-bound. This means that our literature has a direct bearing on our understanding of who we are as a people, but that our literature might also be mistrusted as a good primary source for that understanding. Why? For one, the creative/imagined worlds fabricated in literary language are not documentable—not entirely real at all. The liberties historical novelists take are problematical to scholars of Kansas history and culture. The collapsing of characters, geographies, and time lines, as well as the need for high drama and climax, might not match the scholar’s concern for fact. Margaret Hill McCarter will never be taken seriously as historian. Perhaps she will never be taken seriously as a literary writer, either, although she was on the best-seller lists of her times. But she created a sense of Kansas—hopeful, adventure-filled, rewarding—that tells us a great deal about ourselves at the turn of the twentieth century. And, although trained as a teacher of English—she came to Topeka in 1888—she also considered herself a “researcher/historian.” Of her, Zula Bennington Greene (Topeka’s “Peggy of the Flint Hills”) wrote, “She talked to men who had taken part in many of the events she wrote about and researched diligently so that her books would be historically accurate.”¹⁶

Paul Wellman, another best-selling writer of historical fiction, shares McCarter’s fate as little read and at best skeptically trusted, but his pioneering sagas, his westerns, and his affection for the High Plains landscape tell us a great deal about the American fondness for the West that developed during and after the Second World War. And Wellman’s insights into the state bear close reading. I like the Texan in one of his novels who tries to explain Kansas prohibition:

No Kansan likes to do anything easy. He raises his crops hard. He takes his religion hard. To be able to get licker easy would just be contrary to nature for him. So he makes laws to keep him from gettin’ it . . . which makes it harder, which gives mo’ of a point to drinkin’ it, an’ behold, yo’ Kansan thereby derives greater satisfaction of soul out’n it.¹⁷

Even Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965), which he called a “non-fiction novel,” is challenged in the court of detail. Although few significant inaccuracies in his narrative of the Clutter slayings have been unearthed, Capote’s fondness for literary description, his literary decision to cast his story with the criminals rather than their victims, and his implicit argument against capital punishment at book’s end have all made some people suspicious. To this day people in and around Garden City critique Capote’s account, and mostly because of personal

Our literature has a direct bearing on our understanding of who we are as a people, but it might also be mistrusted as a good primary source for that understanding.

16. *Kansas Authors of Best Sellers: A Bibliography of the Works of Martin and Osa Johnson, Margaret Hill McCarter, Charles M. Sheldon, and Harold Bell Wright*, comp. Gene DeGruson (Pittsburg: Kansas State College of Pittsburg, 1970), 10.

17. Paul Iselin Wellman, *Bowl of Brass* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1944), 29.

*The basis of
much of Kansas
literature—all of
our novels, poems,
short stories,
and plays—is
predominantly
historical.*

bias rather than historical inaccuracy. So even a nonfiction novel of the stature of *In Cold Blood* can end up as criticized as a Margaret Hill McCarter or Paul Wellman novel.

Perhaps an easy admission—literature is not history—accounts for negative attitudes about our state’s literature as a way of understanding who we are. But still other stumbling blocks toward a renaissance in the reading and study of Kansas literature must be removed.

WHOSE RESEARCH?

Beyond the historical novel, the basis of much of Kansas literature—all of our novels, poems, short stories, and plays—is predominantly historical. This means that much of our literature is researched, and researchable to its sources. Sometimes the historical nature of Kansas literature can cause problems. For example, Wichita poet Bruce Cutler was inspired by the territorial history of Kansas in the years between the territorial and statehood centennials. He thoroughly researched the May 19, 1858, Marais des Cygnes Massacre, then wrote what the *Missouri Historical Review* called “a tale of almost epic proportions based on historical fact.”¹⁸ Reviews in literary publications were equally laudatory. Rebecca Patterson, the literature editor of *Midwest Quarterly*, published at Pittsburg State University, wrote that *A West Wind Rises* is a dramatic reconstruction in “vigorous verse narrative” and introduces the reader to the background of the struggle, to the strong, grim men who carried on the fight, to the hopes and dreams of the people involved in the tragedy, the “people who lived and died . . . for the land that one day would be ours. The work is in the epic tradition of Stephen Vincent Benet’s *John Brown’s Body* and John Neihardt’s *Cycle of the West*, and is fully sustained by the strength and quality of Mr. Cutler’s craftsmanship.”¹⁹

Early reviews of the book were quite positive, both in terms of historical research and literary quality. But history itself is often re-written—part of what this series of review essays is designed to remind us of. In the new research into territorial Kansas, Cutler is suddenly squeezed between an “old” history and a “new” history. For its 1999 edition of Cutler’s epic poem, the Center for Kansas Studies wanted to emphasize the poem’s historical as well as poetical importance. We asked Dale Watts, who was then on the staff of the Kansas State Historical Society and a historian of the territorial period, to write an afterword for *A West Wind Rises*. As he read Cutler’s work he noticed several recently documented changes in the historical records—about Sharps rifles, about whether John Brown (Pottawatomie Massacre) or Charles Hamilton (Marais des Cygnes) really knew anything about the political views of most of those massacred, about the shabby justification of antislavery violence compared with the reprehensible and senseless violence of the proslavery factions. At the end of his “Afterword,” Watts writes:

18. Bruce Cutler, *A West Wind Rises: Massacre at Marais des Cygnes* (Topeka: Center for Kansas Studies/Woodley Press, Washburn University, 1999), back panel. From Cutler’s file of initial reviews of his work, which was first published by the University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, in 1962.

19. *Midwest Quarterly* 4 (January 1963): 191.

Should the free-state ethical position be deemed superior to that of their enemies, must the Pottawatomie Massacre be deemed more justifiable than the Marais des Cygnes Massacre because it was carried out in the name of a great cause? History so far has answered, "Yes," but perhaps the time has come to denounce equally the bloodshed by both sides.²⁰

Interestingly, then, Cutler's poem is historically accurate to the history Cutler researched in the early 1960s. But since our interpretations of history change, Cutler suddenly has historical inaccuracies—all part of the historical record he pored over before he wrote. Interestingly, too, his interpretation of events, because of new historical attitudes and research, is rightfully suspect. The whole spectrum of interpretation has shifted. As Watts writes:

After all, the antislavery/free-state/antigovernment factions won the civil war in Kansas, both politically and militarily, against the proslavery/Law-and-Order/pro-government factions. With this victory came the right and ability to construct the history of territorial Kansas more or less in whatever way they pleased. There, the strong tendency has been to ignore or forget any evidence that reflects favorably on their enemies and emphasize, even exaggerate, anything that adds credit to them and their position. . . . Almost invariably, only the free-state cry has been heard.²¹

Cutler expresses that "free-state cry." And finally, Cutler's poem gives us a brilliantly written look at a certain time and place in Kansas as interpreted during our statehood centennial and its 1961 attitudes and beliefs about the Bleeding Kansas years of the making of the state. So, given careful context, Cutler's poem contributes to our sense of who and what we are, and what we came from, along with, and sometimes in spite of, the historical record.

WOMEN'S WORK

Another stumbling block, I think, is in the denigration of women's literary work. In fact, a great deal of Kansas literature is women's literature, and women were instrumental in early attempts to create a state literary culture—editing magazines, creating anthologies, participating in huge numbers in organizations like the Kansas Authors Club, and doing a lot of the teaching of local history and literature in one of the arenas accessible to them: the school. Women who went beyond the classroom, clubroom, or editing desk often had trouble finding publish-



Bruce Cutler's epic poem A West Wind Rises is historically accurate to the history Cutler researched in the 1960s. But because our interpretation of history has changed since that time, the poem suddenly is deemed historically inaccurate.

20. Cutler, *A West Wind Rises*, afterword by Dale Watts, 77.

21. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

*A great deal of
Kansas literature
is women's
literature, and
women were
instrumental in
early attempts to
create a state
literary culture.*

ers for their work. So poets of real merit, such as Nora B. Cunningham of Chanute, might end up in bibliographies with only a few citations for poems published in magazines and newspapers. Others self-published, and so few copies are left for us to study—May Frank Converse, the mother of the later-famous artist Elizabeth “Grandma” Layton, was an active poet who had her books published by her local newspaper, the *Wellsville Globe*. Those who made the larger markets of national presses often fulfilled the image of the “woman” writer, or the writer of “women’s” books—popular, romantic and not to be taken as seriously as the literary fiction of the few women luminaries publishing during that time, such as Willa Cather or Kate Chopin or Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Margaret Hill McCarter, whom I’ve already mentioned, was pigeonholed in just this way. She published twenty-two novels—moving from the local Crane and Company of Topeka to the more regional A. C. McClurg and Company of Chicago and finally to Harper and Brothers and A. L. Burt Company of New York. She was very prominent in Kansas and in the United States—the first woman to ever address a Republican National Convention, in 1920. Still, when McCarter was profiled in Kansas in a Crane and Company pamphlet, the biographical essay by May Belleville Brown seemed more bent on portraying the author as an ordinary woman, a friend, a neighbor, than as a literary luminary. Sure, the great accomplishments are all noted. But the final paragraphs speak to the issue of women’s work:

And in spite of all this magic which she has worked before our eyes, she is still Margaret Hill McCarter,—wife, mother, home-maker, friend. With a keen sense of humor, and a never-failing good-nature, she is an ideal companion; and with her many activities she still has time for a passing friend. The old proverb, “A prophet is not without honor save in his own country,” is not regarded in her case, for all Kansas honors Mrs. McCarter for herself, not merely because of her accomplishments.²²

The italics are mine, because portraits of male writers would typically not take accomplishment as lightly, nor see good nature as so important.

Taking women seriously as writers, in the context of their time and place, can lead to great rewards. In the mid-1970s Pittsburg State University Special Collections Librarian Gene DeGruson told Jeffrey Ann Goudie, free-lance writer (and, by the way, my spouse), about the collection of Edythe Squier Draper, a woman who had spent the final years of her life as the Oswego correspondent to the *Parsons Sun*. Before her life as newspaper columnist, however, Draper had been a literary writer of real note. The Draper collection included published and unpublished short stories, as well as unpublished novels and correspondence with some of the country’s most prominent editors and publishers. Goudie dedicated herself to reading through the collection, researching Edythe Squier Draper’s life, interviewing and corresponding with Draper’s living relatives, and analyzing Draper’s literary and newspaper career. The result was a bio-critical study of one of Kansas’s finest writers, first published in the *Little Balkans Review*, edited then by

22. May Belleville Brown, “Margaret Hill McCarter: a life of busy days,” in Margaret Hill McCarter, *The Noted Lecturer and Author, A Biographical Sketch and Review of her Writings* (Topeka: Crane and Co., n.d.), 22.

Gene DeGruson. DeGruson wrote: "Our cover article by Jeffrey Ann Goudie presents Edythe Squier Draper, a talented writer who received far less acclaim in her lifetime than was her due, but whose personality and outlook never allowed her to grow old or disillusioned."²³

In establishing Draper's literary importance, and talent, Goudie writes:

readers voted Edythe's story "Counted Out" as the best short story *Household* ran in 1929; Theodore Dreiser's "Fine Furniture" placed second. Her "The Voice of the Turtle" was reprinted in Edward J. O'Brien's *The Best Short Stories of 1930*, a volume which included Dorothy Parker and Katherine Anne Porter. . . . Her short-short stories "Poindexter" and "In Washington Tonight" were placed in the highest ranking group by the O. Henry Memorial Volume selection committees in 1930 and 1932. . . .

Clifton P. Fadiman, then head of the editorial department at Simon and Schuster, wrote Edythe a letter in 1928 which opened with the rather florid: "Your work interests us vividly." He promised "a special reception" for any manuscript of hers and wrote that Simon and Schuster would be "particularly anxious to examine the novel that every distinctive short story writer inevitably has in mind."²⁴

The story of her short-story successes, of her failure to publish a novel, of her later enthusiastic newspaper writing, is a fascinating glimpse of both an individual writer and a woman of her time, bound as she was to the duties of family-rearing and the harsh realities of depression poverty. Goudie's article is also the preface to a collection of the best of Draper's Kansas short stories: *As Grass* (Topeka: Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies, 1994).

The remaining question: How many women (or men, for that matter) are buried in undeserved literary obscurity for lack of interest in Kansas literary studies, for lack of scholars and writers, for lack of special collections willing to find and preserve the lives of our writers?

THE READING PROBLEM

Another stumbling block to the study of Kansas literature is what I'd simply call "readability." *A Certain Rich Man* (1909) by William Allen White, for example, was so revered by the state that a school edition was printed by the state printer, and the novel was used in Kansas classrooms to introduce students to the state's history between its days as a nineteenth-century territory and the Progressive Republican reforms of the early twentieth century. White captures Kansas well, and initial reviews of the book were often positive. For example:

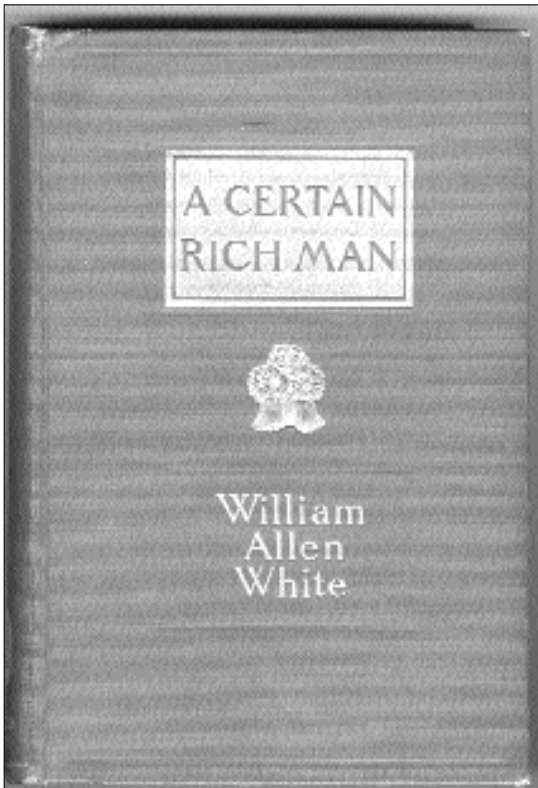
The test is whether the book moves the heart, whether it entertains, whether it is a true reflection of life; or whether it bores, preaches, offends the taste. Judged by this test, Mr. White's story is eminently worth while, a refreshing oasis in the unusually arid field of recent fiction. It is brave, honest, and kindly.²⁵

23. Gene DeGruson, "Preface," *Little Balkans Review: A Southeast Kansas Literary and Graphics Quarterly* 1 (Spring 1981): v.

24. Jeffrey Ann Goudie, "The Wrong Side of the Tapestry: Edythe Squier Draper," *ibid.* 2-3.

25. *Outlook* 92 (August 21, 1909): 922.

*How many
women or men
are buried in
undeserved literary
obscurity for lack
of interest in
Kansas literary
studies, for lack
of scholars
and writers?*



A Certain Rich Man, by respected writer William Allen White, is an example of a work caught in the “readability” stumbling block. While reviewed well initially, it is also criticized as “inclined to be rather heavy at times,” and more bluntly, “It is such a big book, one must wish it were actually great.”

And: “While the criticism may be urged that the story is inclined to be rather heavy at times, it is nevertheless a fine bit of work and will well repay a careful reading.”²⁶

But the reviews also were negative:

So long as there is an abundance of neatly bound sermons on the market, this particular sort of fiction seems not merely superfluous, but not quite honest. Is it not time to suggest the passage of a pure-food law for our brain products, requiring a qualitative analysis to be printed on the covers?²⁷

Even more bluntly put: “It is such a big book, one must wish it were actually great.”²⁸ Most contemporary readers will agree more with the negative criticisms of *A Certain Rich Man*. True, historians and scholars are used to reading all kinds of challenging documents: nearly illegible letters, poorly written diaries, ledgers that are mostly numbers, business papers that are highly impersonal. They read because they have a specific desire for particular information. They know they are not reading literature and are thus forgiving. But the Kansas literary scholar must learn, in some cases, to read literature in this same forgiving way—because the goal is something other than the literature itself. In the case of White’s work, the dedicated reading of so many pages reaps fine rewards if, literary value aside, someone is looking for a fictional version of all the central events in the first fifty years of Kansas history, told through the lens of the dominant social, political, and religious beliefs of a majority of Kansans at the turn of the twentieth century.

THE FALSE DOCUMENT, FALSE PLACE

One final stumbling block. Kansas literary writers can be mistrusted for the reasons I’ve discussed: they care more for atmosphere, character, action, story, and structure than they do for history; their research might be poor, or inaccurate, or use inaccurate sources. Beyond that, the Kansas writer might also very deliberately change, warp, even re-write and falsify history. I think here of *The Last Cattle Drive* by Robert Day.²⁹ The novel, set in the mid-1970s, is about a rancher, Spangler “Star” Tukle, who is tired of paying exorbitant trucking fees to get his cattle to the Kansas City stockyards. He decides, with the help of his wife, his knowledgeable ranch hand, and a greenhorn (who also narrates the story), to drive the 250-plus cattle across Kansas himself, everything else be damned. The book is well-researched geographically and follows Kansas highways so faithfully (Day drove them several times) that anyone can repeat the jour-

26. *Literary Digest* 39 (September 18, 1909): 448.

27. *Forum* 41 (September 1909).

28. *New York Times*, October 23, 1909.

29. Robert Day, *The Last Cattle Drive* (1976; reprint Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

ney (or could until Clinton Reservoir was completed). Day liked playing with the authenticity of the drive so much, in fact, that as he visited the places his characters visit, for example the Brookville Hotel (when it was in Brookville), he signed the register with their names. Day tried very deliberately to create a false sense that the cattle drive actually took place. He included episodes that fit in with the current events around Gorham/Hays of the time period. At one point the fictional characters of the novel meet up with some Hollywood folks who are shooting a movie: this refers to Peter Bogdanovich, who directed *Paper Moon* (1973) in that part of the state.

When I interviewed author Robert Day about the writing and reception of *The Last Cattle Drive*, I asked about the almost deliberate attempt to create a “false” document. He relished it, he told me. He liked people to ask him if the drive really happened. He showed me Spangler’s name in the Brookville Hotel register. And, he went on to say, at the same time he cared about the kind of reliability that would make people believe in the cattle drive’s possibility, he had a very different sense of what he called “creating” Kansas. He opted for his Kansas. Not the real Kansas, but the Kansas they read about in his creative writing. In other words, he claimed something every fiction writer has the right to claim: the right to create reality for the reader. I suggest this as a stumbling block because literary writers will always choose this paradox: choosing Kansas as setting, but making it a personal or idiosyncratic Kansas. That is part of the territory when we study Kansas literature.

III. THESE PAST THIRTY YEARS

Given all the stumbling blocks, the past thirty years have seen big changes in attitudes about and understanding of creative writing, and a willingness to study Kansas literature.

An explosion of creative writing programs all over the country has had its ripple effect in Kansas. The number of writers in academe has grown rapidly, and these are often people interested in the place where they find themselves. Bruce Cutler, himself an academic—longtime director of the Master of Fine Arts program at Wichita State University—was raised elsewhere and trained elsewhere. But when he came to Kansas he found much here to write about and to study. He even participated with the University Press of Kansas to bring out a volume of Wellington poet May Williams Ward, one of those women writers whose work had not seen enough exposure.³⁰ More of these writers in academe are writing about the state, bringing other writers to the state, and engaging local libraries and the Kansas Arts Commission, the Kansas State Historical Society, and the Kansas Humanities Council. So all of our cultural institutions now have increased access to writers as a resource. Some of them also have been very supportive of writers: the Kansas Arts Commission, for example, gives literary fellowships in poetry, fiction writing, and playwriting.

30. May Williams Ward, *In That Day* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969). The foreword is by Bruce Cutler, who touts Ward’s “way of seeing,” and this slim volume (eighty pages) is illustrated by Ward’s own block prints.

The past thirty years have seen big changes in attitudes about and understanding of creative writing, and a willingness to study Kansas literature.

Popular culture studies have made historical novels, detective novels, science fiction, fantasy, comic books, graphic novels, and underground poetry legitimate fields of study.

With creative writers in English departments comes the inevitable need for student, state, and regional literary magazines. Although these publications have had mixed success over the past thirty years, they also have been a mainstay of opportunities to read work by Kansans and about Kansas. *Cottonwood* at the University of Kansas, *Kansas Quarterly* (now sadly defunct) at Kansas State University, *Midwest Quarterly* at Pittsburg State University, and many other predominantly student literary magazines are rich resources. The issues of the short-run but wonderful *Little Balkans Review* remain important to those studying Kansas literature. Space does not allow me to mention every magazine that has come and gone over the past three decades, but these sometimes steady, sometimes sporadic, publications have augmented Kansas literary culture.

The past thirty years also have seen a huge expansion of the literary canon. The search for women writers, for minority writers, for gay and lesbian writers, for ethnic writers, has made the discovery of regional resources an approved pursuit by academics. John Edgar Tidwell, who was raised in Independence, Kansas, and who went to Washburn University for his bachelor's degree in English, was among those interested in the literary history of African Americans. He learned of the life and work of Frank Marshall Davis, of Arkansas City, a fine poet and journalist who migrated to Chicago and finally to Hawaii. Besides collections of poetry, Davis wrote an autobiography, *Livin' the Blues*. But he was having trouble finding a publisher for it. Edgar Tidwell, encouraged and assisted by Fred Whitehead, Elizabeth Schultz, William L. Andrews, and Irma Wassall, among others, began scholarly work on Frank Marshall Davis. Tidwell edited Davis's *Livin' the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet* for the University of Wisconsin Press's Studies in American Autobiography series.³¹ In June 2002 the University of Illinois Press will release another Tidwell-edited book, this time of Davis's poetry, *Black Moods, Collected Poems*, as part of the American Poetry Recovery Series. Tidwell has plans to branch into a study of Davis's journalism. This kind of discovery, recovery, research, and scholarship is still very possible as the canon continues to expand.

Similarly, popular culture studies have made the research into state literatures, regional literatures, historical novels, detective novels, science fiction, fantasy, comic books, graphic novels, underground poetry—even graffiti and pornography—legitimate fields of study. Many of the stumbling blocks I mentioned earlier are simply part of a recognizable and exciting territory for those scholars expanding into popular culture studies.

Along with these changes, regionalism itself has become much more interesting to scholars. At a time when we seem to be living in an increasingly homogenized world, the real differences between states—their histories, traditions, cultures, laws, food—are being celebrated in everything from national media and tourism to literary publishing. Presses in Kansas have risen to meet demand for local interest and local studies. Any examination of the catalogs of the University Press of Kansas will show an upswing in Kansas books of photography, local his-

31. Frank Marshall Davis, *Livin' the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); see also John Edgar Tidwell, "Frank Marshall Davis: 'Ad Astra, Per Aspera,'" *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 18 (Winter 1995–1996): 270–83.

tory, cultural studies, autobiography, folklore, biography, even a Kansas cookbook. In Topeka the Woodley Press at Washburn University was founded in the early 1980s to print the work of Kansas literary writers—poets, playwrights, and fiction writers. Small runs of important work by such writers as William Stafford, Gene DeGruson, and Harley Elliott have added to our literary culture. My own first collection of stories, *Passes at the Moon* (1985), was with Woodley Press, and being taken seriously in print boosted my confidence and exposure as a writer who sought to be a Kansas writer.

The interest of current magazines and local presses has a tradition. The now defunct *Kansas Magazine* and *Household Magazine* (Topeka-based, with a fifty-four-year history) were once part of an effort to print and sell local literature. Topeka's Crane and Company once was the foremost publisher of books of interest to Kansans. The *Topeka Journal* touted Crane's efforts in a 1903 headline: "Among the Books: A Glimpse at the Crane & Co. Catalogue. What One Firm is Doing for Kansas Literature. MANY BOOKS LISTED. Something About the Names That Are There. Gossip of Interest to Lovers of Books." The article begins: "Few people appreciate the fact that there is a firm in the west that is doing much for the literature of the great middle section of the country." And it ends: "There are also books by . . . many other enterprising Kansans in Mr. Crane's Catalogue. It is profusely illustrated.

"It brings distinctly before the public what Kansas is doing in literature. The firm which is acting as its sponser [sic] deserves the support and encouragement of the public."³²

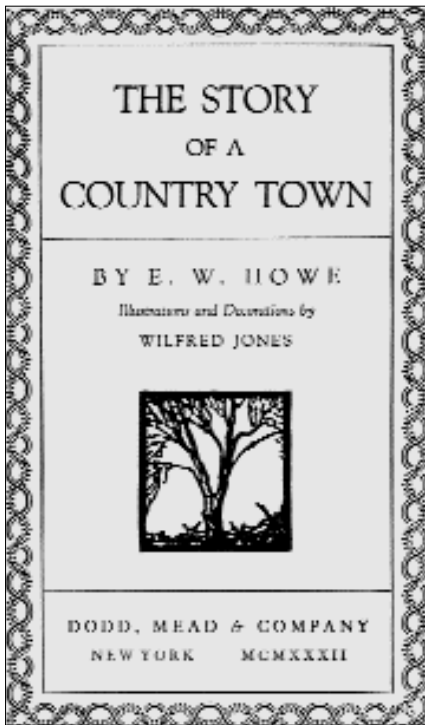
Along with the presses, libraries have shown continued interest. They have increased their special collections holdings—the Kansas Collection at the University of Kansas Libraries is one good example—and they have added staff to support materials of all kinds, including the rich literary resources of the state. Local libraries have realized the importance of concentrating on, collecting, salvaging, and cataloging the work of local writers. Both Wichita and Topeka have large and valuable collections. The Topeka/Shawnee County Public Library also is home to the Kansas Center for the Book—modeled after the National Center for the Book in Washington, D.C.—dedicated to helping Kansans all over the state become more familiar with Kansas books and writers. Because of personal experience, I appreciate the libraries in some of our towns: Salina and Larned have both opened their doors to my research on several occasions. The Chanute Library put together a much-needed volume of the work of Nora B. Cunningham, entitled *Decades* (1978). The Kansas Heritage Center in Dodge City is collector and publisher of many fine Kansas materials.

Regional studies centers, most notably the Great Plains Studies Center at Emporia State University (ESU) and the Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies (CKS), have paid attention to our literature. ESU publishes *Heritage of the Great Plains*, which frequently includes scholarly articles about writers and writing. The CKS has reprinted some of the books mentioned in this article as a way of keeping Kansas literature available and in print for use in the classroom and for personal enjoyment.



Among the earlier publishers of literature by and for Kansans was Topeka's Crane and Company, which issued catalogs in an effort to promote literature to the public.

32. "Kansas Authors and Books" clippings, vol. 1, 3–4.



Many other literary texts deserve careful study because they too are relevant to eras in Kansas culture and history. Among them, E. W. Howe's novel *The Story of a Country Town*.

So, for the past thirty years, the climate has been good, the soil rich, and the fertile field of literary studies has seen much harvest.

IV. SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

My suggestions for Kansans always include reinforcing that which has been richest in the past. I'll be brief, as I have already mentioned a great deal of what has worked in Kansas literary studies.

Certain themes, certain lenses, need to be explored in scholarship about Kansas literature. For example, many Kansas novels could be classified as "coming-of-age." This may be because our writers, who often grew up here, left the state soon after their own coming-of-age. When they set a book in Kansas, it will tend toward the autobiographical. Their later books often are set elsewhere. Langston Hughes left, as does his character Sandy. Gordon Parks left, as does his character Newt. Robert Day left, although his young character, who grows up on a cattle drive, stays. Jane Smiley's character, Lidie Newton, comes to Kansas, grows up, then leaves. Maxine Clair left, and her Irene, of *Rattlebone*, is preparing herself to do so as well. Kansas also is rich in the areas of race and freedom. From the Bleeding Kansas of territorial days to the issues raised by *Brown v Board*, our literature comments on the nature of race relations and the meaning of freedom—racial, educational, sexual, religious. Our rich pioneering literature raises questions about the goals of the pioneers (land, or education to leave the land), our relationship to nature (mother, or stepmother), and our tension between spiritual values and material needs. The subtlety of the Kansas landscape (level rather than flat, as William Inge teaches us) raises many questions of how we define beauty, what aesthetics Kansans adhere to that others might not, and whether landscape itself dictates the poetic language used to describe our place. Many other themes and lenses would prove fruitful to scholars of history and literature if they came to concentrate beyond a single work or a specific author.

Although this essay concentrates on literary studies, Kansas literature is also very fruitful for those in other disciplines. Because I know the literature I am frequently asked to contribute to projects that are not strictly literary. Those interested in such topics as small-town life, or water use, or the cultural images of Kansas, even in teenagers in the state have come to our literature for a fictional take on these subjects. I have used Kansas literature to enhance my own essays on drought and dust, water, wheat harvest, and the state's relationship to *The Wizard of Oz*.³³ Others have done the same thing: for example, Diane Quantic of Wichita State University (although with more emphasis on the Great Plains)³⁴ and C.

33. See Thomas Fox Averill, "Of Drought and Dust: Expressions in Kansas Literature," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Winter 1997–1998): 231–40; Averill, "Watermarks: Drops, Draws, Creeks, Rivers, Droughts and Floods in the Literature of Kansas," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 32 (Spring/Summer 1999): 38–54; Averill, "Kansas Wheat Harvest," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 23 (Spring/Summer 2000): 112–19; Averill, "Oz and Kansas Culture," *ibid.* 12 (Spring 1989): 2–12.

34. Diane Dufva Quantic, *The Nature of Place: A Study of Great Plains Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

Robert Haywood of Washburn University, who, once retired from his administrative position, began writing fine works of Kansas history and even a collection of short fiction set in Kansas during the Great Depression.³⁵ Others, no doubt, should be included, but space does not permit it.

As well as being included in scholarly studies, literary writers need to be included as part of any important historical, social, cultural marker in the state. After all, the celebration of the statehood centennial in 1961 inspired such work as *A West Wind Rises* and *Kansas Renaissance*, one of the best anthologies of twentieth-century Kansas writing.³⁶ Literary writers themselves might be the occasion of markers as well. Independence Community College, beginning in the very late 1970s, holds regular celebrations with an annual Inge Festival. Each spring, actors, directors, playwrights, scholars, and those interested in theater and local history gather together in Independence to discuss the life, work, influence, and importance of Kansas's Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright.

The University of Kansas, in January/February 2002, celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Langston Hughes with a huge and very successful symposium, "Let America Be America Again." Scholars, writers, musicians, actors, and audience came from all over the world to Lawrence. The study of Langston Hughes will never be the same. Should someone in Kansas be organizing for centennials of the births of other notable Kansas writers: Frank Marshall Davis in 2005, Gordon Parks in 2012, William Inge in 2013, William Stafford in 2014, Gwendolyn Brooks in 2017?³⁷

Surely, too, there are more texts that will bear fruitful study because they have relevance to eras in Kansas culture and history. I've already mentioned the scholarly edition of the John Ise classic *Sod and Stubble*, with additional material by Von Rothenberger. A scholarly edition of William Allen White's first collection of short stories, *The Real Issue* (1896), would make a fine contribution.³⁸ One of E. W. Howe's novels, *The Story of a Country Town*, also would be significant. One such text, with a Kansas connection, was resurrected by Gene DeGruson when he found that the original Upton Sinclair manuscript of *The Jungle* had first appeared as installments in the *Appeal To Reason*, once the largest-circulation socialist newspaper, published in Girard, Kansas. DeGruson's restored text was heralded as true discovery and incisive scholarship.

The constant need to know what is available, in and out of print, makes bibliographies—where I started all those years ago—still very important. I have made several literary maps, modeled after the 1961 *Centennial Map of Kansas Literature* by Ben Fuson.³⁹ And the Center for Kansas Studies and others have put to-

Our rich pioneering literature raises questions about the goals of the pioneers, our relationship to nature, and our tension between spiritual values and material needs.

35. C. Robert Haywood, *The Preacher's Kid* (Topeka: Woodley Press, 1985). His historical books include *Cowtown Lawyers* (1988), *The Victorian West* (1991), *Tough Daisies* (1995), *The Merchant Prince of Dodge City* (1998).

36. Warren Kliever and Stanley J. Solomon, eds., *Kansas Renaissance*, an anthology of contemporary Kansas writing (N.p.: Coronado Publications, 1961).

37. The suggestion of a Brooks celebration was made at a gathering at the Lawrence Arts Center during the Hughes Symposium by poet Kevin Young, who grew up in Topeka. His first book, *Most Way Home*, was published in 1995 by Morrow, New York, and reprinted by Zoland Books, Cambridge, Mass. His second book of poems is *To Repel Ghosts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Zoland Books, 2001). A third collection, from Knopf, is due out in 2003.

38. See Joe W. Kraus, "The Publication of William Allen White's *The Real Issue*," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 43 (Summer 1997): 193–202.

39. See Thomas Fox Averill, *A Literary Map of Kansas, 1994: 34 Books for the 34th Star* (with additional bibliography), *Kansas English* 80 (Fall 1994): 48–73.

*Our best work
on the literature
of our state will
come when we
truly honor our
writers and their
contributions.*

gether extensive bibliographies of our literature. Such is the most basic but always present need in any field—to know what texts exist, and where.

I've mentioned in several places the reprinting of important Kansas literary texts by the Center for Kansas Studies at Washburn University. This project was undertaken because of the simple need to have quality texts to teach. If our books are out of print, then they are, except in photocopied form, impossible to use in the classroom, where we have a chance to expose our students to Kansas literature at all grade levels. I have taught Kansas literature for nearly thirty years, and a few other professors in colleges and universities around Kansas have joined me. If we don't teach Kansas literature, we can't expect students to discover it and find in it a passion. To my knowledge, Washburn University was the first (and may still be the only) university to offer a Kansas studies program as a minor field of study.

Our literary and cultural magazines might be certain to dedicate space to Kansas writers: *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* has just inaugurated a film review section. Regular looks at fiction and poetry published by Kansans, or set in Kansas, might also be included there and in all sorts of other venues. I am always fond of William Allen White's truism, although I cannot find its source, that "A first rate poet in Ford County would do more to bring Western Kansas into the approval of mankind than a packing house." The state itself, through its institutions, needs to make certain that Kansas writers are honored and known. As White finishes his essay, "Kansas: A Puritan Survival":


Should a state brag of the fact that it distributes its wealth equitably—almost evenly—when it has produced no great poet. . . . Surely the dead level of economic and political democracy is futile if out of it something worthy—something eternally worthy—does not come. The tree shall be known by its fruit. What is the fruit of Kansas?⁴⁰

White would suggest that literary writing can and should be the fruit, and valued as such, studied as such, and promoted as such.

My final suggestion is most simple: a change in attitude. Our best work on the literature of our state will come when we truly honor our writers and their contributions. Then we will begin understanding, collecting, interviewing, and studying the work of the past, as well as the contributions and careers of contemporary and recent writers. When I wanted to do some literary study of my own, in the late 1970s, I wrote a grant that was funded by the Kansas Humanities

40. William Allen White, "Kansas: A Puritan Survival," in *What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State*, ed. Thomas Fox Averill (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 62.

Council. I proposed going to six libraries to read the work of, research, and do a public program on as many Kansas writers. I called my project "Six Kansas Writers in Place," and I deliberately chose a balance of writers in terms of region and gender. But I made certain that all of them were either living or deceased within the past decade or two. I worked on Paul I. Wellman in Cimarron and Dodge City, William Inge in Independence, Edythe Squier Draper in Oswego, Helen Rhoda Hoopes in Lawrence, Julia Ferguson Siebel in Colby, and Joseph Stanley Pennell in Junction City. I wanted to interview living relatives, people in the communities who knew them and had read their work when it was first published. I wanted easy access to crisp (not dusty) local newspaper files, and to scrapbooks kept by librarians. I was rewarded—even inundated—with material. I was allowed to copy photographs of Helen Rhoda Hoopes as a girl. I was given personal correspondence by the relatives of Paul I. Wellman. I was able to telephone and correspond with the only living writer I chose, Julia Ferguson Siebel. I received photocopies of personal papers important to Edythe Draper. I interviewed a close friend of Joseph Stanley Pennell—she was a former burlesque dancer, and she treated me to a glimpse at her photo album as well. I was given lengthy interviews that led to other interviews. I was taken into the boyhood home of William Inge to look at the actual "Dark at the Top of the Stairs." I saw writers' homes, their schools, the hospitals where they spent illnesses, the cemeteries where they lay buried, and many other places associated with their lives. Curiosity and respect begets information and, finally, scholarship.

I travel the state often. Rarely do I see an interest in Kansas's literary culture physically represented. Sure, Emporia has signs for William Allen White; Topeka has a small park named for Gwendolyn Brooks; Lawrence has a quote from Langston Hughes on its city hall. Downs, Kansas, is in the process of restoring the Ise homestead as a living memorial to the author of *Sod and Stubble* and his parents. Many opportunities exist for remembering and studying our writers, and not only through their books. Traveling, we should see and visit our writers—their towns, their schools, their homes, their graves, their haunts. Our rich tradition needs to be recognized, studied, and celebrated—never denigrated or forgotten. Physical presence enhances the mental, imaginative world of Kansas writing. One advantage of studying the literature of a place, while in the place, is this interplay. Literature helps us understand the relationship between the real and the imagined. And, at the same time, literature enhances both the place and our imaginative connection to it. Kansas literature exists somewhere in between. Our creative language places us right between the difficulties and the stars of our state motto: *Ad Astra per Aspera*. 

*Traveling, we
should see and visit
our writers—their
towns, their schools,
their homes, their
graves, their
haunts. Our rich
tradition needs to
be recognized,
studied, and
celebrated.*